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ABSTRACT

Literature, one of the fine arts requiring imagination both from the writer and from the reader, can be read for relaxation, for escape, or for its diversionary effect. Literature can be read also for stimulation, for challenge, or as an antidote to boredom and shallow thinking. Teachers of literature must convince three basic groups of the value of teaching literature in an age that views it as being irrelevant and a frill: students, administrators, and the community. Students can be convinced of the worth of literature if they see it as relevant to their lives and concerns. One way to build their interest is to build on students' interests using contemporary books on a theme such as heroism, masculinity, love, or courage and then explore more unfamiliar and more challenging literature on the same theme. Administrators can be convinced of the value of teaching literature by seeing a program that builds a favorable reputation for the school or the district. Many members of the community are demanding statistical validity as the justification for the existence of a program or a discipline as they call for minimum competency testing. Demonstrating the value of teaching literature as means of improving reading, comprehension, and writing skills can persuade community members to support the existence of a literature program. (TJ)

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WHY TEACH LITERATURE?

Desna Wallin Hansen

Literature - placebo or panacea? Is literature merely an innocuous escape mechanism, consisting of harmless, sometimes sugar-coated ideas that make people think they feel better while not actually altering their mental or physical state? Or, on the contrary is literature a panacea, a cure-all for both personal follies and society's ills? But these are two extreme views of literature. Does the truth lie somewhere between these polarities? Before responding to these questions, there are two others which should be resolved. First, what can be regarded as literature? And second, what is the purpose, the function of literature if, indeed, it has a function?

Literature in its broadest sense is everything that has ever been written. It includes comic books and religious tracts, recipes and instructions, political propaganda and advertising circulars. It encompasses the novels of Mark Twain and the plays of William Shakespeare and the poetry of Sappho. However, in its strictest sense, literature means more than printed words. To speak of a piece of writing as literature is to praise it. Truly great literature, according to Kenneth Rexroth, "...deals with the archetypes of human experience, with characters at once concrete and universal, and with events and relationships that are invariant in the lives of all men."[1] Literature, then, is one of the fine arts requiring imagination both from the writer and from the reader or audience.

The modern historian and Nobel prize winner, Herbert J. Muller, provides some helpful insight in addressing the question: "What is the purpose of literature?" He maintains that literature is "the best corrective for the deplorable tendencies of our technological society."[2] Literature can provide a reflection of historical and social thought. It can be a disturbing experience,

[1]Kenneth Rexroth, Classics Revisited (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1965), p. IX.

[2]Herbert J. Muller, In Pursuit Of Relevance (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971), p. 149.

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an unsettling experience on the one hand, or an ordering, a formulative experience on the other. Poets and critics have also made important comments on literature. According to Sir Philip Sidney, the function of literature is to "teach delightfully." Wordsworth maintained that "the end of poetry is to produce excitement in co-existence with an overbalance of pleasure." Matthew Arnold viewed literature as "a criticism of life."

In defining literature and its purpose, then, one may find elements of both the placebo and the panacea. Literature undoubtedly has qualities of the placebo; it can be read for relaxation, for escape, for its diversionary effect. Qualtities of the panacea are also apparent; literature can be read for stimulation, for challenge, as an antidote to boredom and shallow thinking. For these (and many other) reasons, today's students emphatically need literature, especially traditional literature.

Most teachers of literature would agree in the main with the views discussed so far. These answers may satisfy instructors and those few who are enamoured with literature for its own sake, but they will not successfully answer critics who see literature as one of the frills that could easily be eliminated along the path back to the basics. Teachers of literature are definitely facing a dilemma today. Even many of their own kind have defected, holding that literature no longer has an educative power, but serves only to obscure truth. Lionel Trilling cites the 1971 address of Louis Kampf, then president of the Modern Language Association who "assured his colleagues that the teaching of literature is now virtually at its end, having lost all rational justification."[3]

What is a teacher of literature to do? Give up? Decide the struggle is hopeless? Today's teachers find themselves in the uncomfortable position of having to justify their program to hostile opponents consisting of apathetic students, cost-conscious administrators, and demanding parent or community

[3]Lionel Trilling, Mind in the Modern World (New York: The Viking Press, 1972), p. 17.

groups. Frequently, students seem to find literature irrelevant. "Many young people demand to be entertained. They have developed little understanding or appreciation of intrinsic rewards, such as the sense of personal accomplishment that comes about through prolonged effort."[4] Instead of traditional literature, these students want pop writing which they can devour quickly without having to think. Thinking ability develops with exercise as muscles do; students with underdeveloped and unexercised minds abound in today's classrooms. Educators are not entirely positive in their assessments of much of the literature being taught currently, either. Burton Hatlen maintains that literature is merely a collection of second rate writing, those philosophers, social thinkers and scientists who are no longer taken seriously by today's philosophers, economists, sociologists, and scientists. As long as colleagues are interested in a text, it is not literature, but as soon as they abandon a text as outmoded and simplistic, it automatically falls into the realm of literature.[5] The community, too, often sees literature as a frill, unimportant in today's technological society. The back to basics philosophy is resounding through the country's school districts with important repercussions for the teaching of literature. And yet with careful and sensitive planning and genuine communication, it may be possible to turn these groups - the students, the administrators, the community - from sometime foes to solid supporters.

Students

Why not begin with the students? All literature teachers have heard variations on the questions, "Why should we spend our time reading and discussing books which tell of events that never happened?" "Who cares, anyway?" "Why learn about literature?" What good is it?" Students, usually unsuccessful in completely eradicating literature from their studies, demand, at the very least,

[4]Lance M. Gentile and Merna M. McMillan, "Why Won't Teenagers Read?" Journal of Reading, XX (May, 1977), 651-652.

[5]Burton Hatlen, "Why is The Education of Henry Adams 'Literature' While The Theory of the Leisure Class is Not?" College English, XL (February, 1979), 669-672.

literature which is immediately relevant to their limited lives and narrow concerns. Yet those who love and teach literature want to give students the great works of their heritage, the writing of other cultures, the literature that will enrich their imaginations, arouse their social consciences, and enlarge their thinking capacities.

Surely these are praiseworthy objectives. And yet in order to attain these goals, teachers of literature must plan and carry out a carefully constructed campaign, proceeding slowly and cautiously. Teachers cannot pedantically begin their literature course with the plays of Shakespeare, the poetry of Milton, or the novels of Joyce, Stendhal, or Faulkner. It is unrealistic to expect students to come intellectually prepared for traditional literature. Instead, teachers must begin closer to the students' interest level, building on student interests while not prostituting literature. What books are today's students familiar with? Are they more likely to have read Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse Five than Hemingway's For Whom the Bell Tolls? If so, why not begin a thematic unit on war with Catch-22 or The Thin Red Line? These may be much less than great literature, but they may contain a theme, perhaps of masculinity, courage, heroism, that could lead to the next work, perhaps The Caine Mutiny or The Naked and The Dead. From there, the student could be led quite easily to All Quiet on the Western Front, Soldier's Pay, The Red Badge of Courage, and Billy Budd, thus imposing some kind of chronological, as well as thematic order. Or why not discuss poetry by beginning with the lyrics of contemporary songs? In much pop music, rhyme, meter, repetition, alliteration, figurative language, and personification are readily discernible. If the teacher selects a timeless theme, such as love, with which the students feel they can identify, students may respond. The class could analyze some pop music dealing with the love theme. Perhaps the students' attention could then be directed briefly to the poetry of

Ella Wheeler Wilcox, "I Love You" or "Growing Old." From there the instructor could look at the love poetry of Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Herrick's "Upon Julia's Clothes," and Byron's "She Walks in Beauty." Some of Shakespeare's sonnets could provide subjects for lively discussion of different kinds of love, as well as of form and poetic devices. A few of Emily Dickinson's powerful love poems would be a fitting conclusion to such an exploration of love poetry. Again, as with the novel, the students travel from the familiar, the comfortable, to the unfamiliar, the challenging. Students may find, much to their surprise, that they do have something in common with great poets. They discover that certain human experiences transcend the centuries. They become aware, many for the first time, of universal themes in literature and in life. Any instructor who accurately perceives the pulse of the times and correctly pinpoints the students' interests should be able to build thematic units around such contemporary issues as self-fulfillment, corruption in government, obsession with materialism, destruction of natural resources, the role of the family. Beginning with the students' interests, instructors can lead from contemporary, even pop writing, to traditional literature with very little resistance. Pop music and pop writing can then become a springboard, a means of achieving an end, the end being a genuine appreciation and understanding of literature. Along the way, the student draws comparisons, makes value judgments, formulates criticism, and decides independently what makes a piece of writing timeless. Step by small step, enthusiastic and sensitive teachers can lead students from the particular to the general to the universal, from literal meaning to symbolic meaning. As instructors guide students and act as facilitators for independent learning, they become convinced that Sir Philip Sidney was indeed correct when he stated that the function of literature is to "teach delightfully."

Administrators

Administrators are a beleaguered group. Theirs is a no-win situation. They are attempting to walk a safe middle line while being prodded by the board of education, pushed by the parents, demeaned by the faculty, and distracted by the students. Because of their fence-straddling position, they are often criticized as being uncommitted or unsympathetic to literature. What methods can convince a doubting administration (many of whom have had bad experiences with literature courses themselves) of the value of a strong literature program? The experience of Jim May at R.L. Thomas High School in Webster, New York may provide one example of what an energetic instructor can accomplish. "Do you think" he begins, "you could persuade kids to sign up for an English course which would (a) cost them money, and (b) require them to meet evenings in addition to their regular class? No? Well, neither did we, but we were proven so wrong we had to limit the course to twenty-five eager juniors and seniors."[6] The course was called Community Culture. The central objective was to relate cultural events in the community to corresponding literature and other English-oriented activities. As a group the students visited museums and libraries and attended plays and concerts. Then they attempted to relate what they had experienced to their study of literature and writing. The program was immensely successful.[7] Community leaders were delighted to see students participating in cultural events. The commendations and accolades went back to the administrators who couldn't help but be supportive of such an exceptional project.

Another example worth citing is the success of Eliot Wigginton and his students at the small rural high school in Rabin Gap, Georgia. Students there interviewed residents of the Appalachian hills and mountains in an attempt to

[6]Jim May, "Community Culture-A Course With Class," English Journal, LXV (March, 1976), 64.

[7]Ibid., pp. 64-66.

uncover and preserve the culture and folklore of the area. Their findings were recorded in print and published as the highly successful Foxfire series.[8] Why not involve the students in compiling oral histories, a form of literature, of long-time community residents? Every community or neighborhood contains some degree of uniqueness worth writing about and preserving as a form of literature.

Other ideas might include initiating a student column in the local newspaper, having students write reviews of the classics, or publishing a school magazine. Teachers should encourage students to enter every writing contest available, especially those emphasizing literary forms or figures. Some teachers might have a parent night and reiterate the reading and skill development aspect of literature. Still others could arrange for awards to be given to students who excel in literary pursuits on an equal basis with athletic, science, and music awards. They could invite administrators to personally present the awards at recognition assemblies. Above all, literature teachers need to let the administration know what the students are achieving. A successful literature program is led by a teacher who keeps visible and who invites support from colleagues and from the community. Any administrator will support a program that builds a favorable reputation for the school and/or the district. It takes an extra effort on the part of a teacher of literature, but it's a far better way to expend energy than complaining of the lack of support. A teacher must keep the perspective of the badgered administrator in mind. Action, performance, visibility, image, and tangible results are the components of a successful literature program, one that is well-received, appreciated, and supported by the administration.

[8]Eliot Wigginton, Foxfire 5, (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press, 1979).

Community

A very real and earnest element of community leaders and parent organizations is demanding statistical validity as the justification for the existence of a program or a discipline. The cries for minimum competency testing are ringing in school districts across the country. Many educators abhor the advent of minimum competency testing as they see the curriculum narrowing, as they see themselves forced to teach to the tests, as they perceive the minimum becoming the maximum. Unfortunately, an idea that seems so basically sound (everyone should know how to read, write, and compute) is fraught with inconsistencies. Nevertheless, the movement is here to stay; literature teachers must learn not only to live with it, but also to utilize it for their own purposes. Is it possible to turn the arguments of the back to basics constituency to the support of a healthy literature program?

One of the major points of concern identified by those supporting minimum conpetency testing is the apparent inability of many high school graduates to read with some degree of comprehension. Reading is, of course, a basic. The study of literature obviously involves reading. The more experience students have in reading, the more likely it is that they will comprehend and understand written material. Good comprehension is beneficial in all subject areas, not in literature alone. But more than the minimum can be gained through reading good books. Reading literature has a liberating effect. It frees individuals from the limited sphere of personal existence and allows them to explore other times and other places. At the same time, it illumines the ordinary and the commonplace. "After Sinclair Lewis's Main Street, Edgar Lee Masters' Spoon River Anthology, Thomas Wolfe's Look Homeward Angel, or Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio, the American small town never looks the same. After Thoreau's Walden, the back pasture or the creek never looks the same."[9]

[9]Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, Fundamentals of Good Writing (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1949), pp. 462-463.

Of course, the quantity of reading is important; students must read frequently. However, quality is even more important; students must read challenging, even difficult literature. Mortimer Adler and Charles Van Doren maintain that "if you are reading in order to become a better reader, you cannot read just any book or article.... You must tackle books that are beyond you, ...books that are over your head. Only books of that sort will make you stretch your mind."[10] Clifton Fadiman, too, emphasizes the importance of reading timeless literature when he states, "There is no reader so parochial as the one who reads nothing but this morning's books. Books are not rolls, to be devoured only when they are hot and fresh. A good book retains its interior heat and will warm a generation yet unborn. He who confines himself only to today's books is more narrowly circumscribed by time than he who reads only yesteryear's."[11]

Reading literature demands a complex thinking process. It requires the use of words and concepts, which are the primary tools of thought. The more words and concepts one possesses, the more effectively one can think. "In reading the student must try to break down what he reads into its logical divisions and state for himself the relation among these divisions."[12] The reader is forced to think, to organize, to draw conclusions from well-written literature. On the other hand, today's media, radio and television in particular, are so designed as to make thinking completely unnecessary. Writers and advertisers make a business of carefully packaging intellectual positions in such a way that the viewer or listener is not required to think at all. But the careful reading of literature requires the stimulation of thought. This quality alone should surely guarantee literature a central position in the curriculum. Reading literature remains one

10Mortimer Adler and Charles Van Doren, How To Read A Book (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972), p. 339

11Clifton Fadiman, Reading I've Liked (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1945), p. LIII.

12Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, Fundamentals of Good Writing (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1949), p. 462.

of the most effective ways to enlarge reasoning skills and improve thinking ability. Students who learn to read quality literature thoughtfully will have little difficulty with reading comprehension skills.

A second commonly voiced concern of the no-frills movement is that high school graduates cannot compose a logical, coherent, and unified paragraph. Newsweek reports:

> "If your children are attending college, the chances are that they will be unable to write ordinary, expository English with any real degree of structure and lucidity. If they are in high school and planning to attend college, the chances are less than even that they will be able to write English at the minimal college level when they get there. If they are not planning to attend college, their skills in writing English may not even qualify them for secretarial or clerical work. And if they are attending elementary school they are almost certainly not being given the kind of required reading material, much less writing instruction, that might make it possible for them eventually to write comprehensible English."[13]

As a remedy for this situation, proponents of back to basics education demand an emphasis on traditional grammar with its rules, drills, and diagramming. There is a substantial body of research which tends to refute the idea that traditional grammar actually improves writing. Instead, according to Elizabeth F. Haynes, the research shows overwhelmingly that the study of traditional grammar is an "ineffective and inefficient" way to teach students to become better writers.[14]

On the other hand, there exists research which indicates that students improve their writing by reading. There is a positive relationship between good writers and good readers. H.J. Tichy makes the point that while a student enjoys an essay, a story, an article, or a novel,

[13]"Why Johnny Can't Write," Newsweek Magazine, December 8, 1975, p. 58.

[14]Elizabeth F. Haynes, "Using Research in Preparing To Teach Writing," English Journal, LXVII (January, 1978), 83.

> ..."he absorbs, without conscious effort, a knowledge of paragraph structure, an acquaintance with sentence patterns and rhythms, and a feeling for well-chosen words. And these are difficult to acquire in any other way. ...An intelligent man can learn more about writing by reading the best books and critically observing the techniques of the best authors than he can learn in any other way."[15]

Some writing experts are attempting to once again reunite the long-separated skills of reading and writing. In a study done at CUNY by Bossone and Troyka (1976) 1000 college students enrolled in remedial writing and 1000 high school students with writing problems were tested.

> Eighty percent of the experimental group improved in essay writing, compared with 45 percent of the control group, taught by experienced remedial writing instructors. The experimental college classes were taught by graduate interns who used specially developed lesson plans that integrated reading and writing in sequential lessons with prepackaged materials for student use. Teachers were free to adapt the materials and lessons to the needs of their classes. Experimental-group teachers received ongoing inservice training throughout the experiment. The practice materials were designed to coordinate reading and writing skills.[16]

Vocabulary, the very foundation upon which good writing rests, is acquired most effectively through reading. Dean Memering said in a recent article: "Vocabulary is learned through reading rather than through studying isolated vocabulary words. Of the 20,000 to 30,000 words most college grads know, very few were ever taught through any direct instruction."[17] The evidence seems overwhelming. Unquestionably, reading literature helps students to improve their writing skills.

So it would seem that instructors must become public relations experts as well as teachers of literature. Teachers must be able to convince half-hearted students, reluctant administrators, and a doubting public of the tremendous

[15]H.J. Tichy, Effective Writing (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1967), p. 16.

[16]Martha Maxwell, Improving Student Learning Skills (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1979), pp. 248-249.

[17]Dean Memering, "The Reading/Writing Heresy," College Composition & Communication, XXVIII (October, 1977), 224.

immediate, as well as the more far-reaching value of literature in the schools. For literature, after all, is neither panacea nor placebo. It can pacify and anesthetize, but only temporarily. The placebo effect lasts only as long as it takes to complete a second-rate novel. Neither is literature a panacea; reading Sophocles' Oedipus The King will not solve the world's political and social problems. But literature is real; it infuses life with meaning and substance. Long after the latest scientific theory has become obsolete, great literature will still be relevant. Traditional literature is a constant. It provides individuals an anchor in the sea of the rapidly changing technological world. Literature is more necessary, more vital than it has ever been. For "it is easy to convince people that children need to learn the alphabet and numbers... How do we help people to realize that what matters... is how a person's inner life finally puts together the alphabet and numbers of his outer life? What really matters is whether he uses the alphabet for the declaration of war or for the description of a sunrise, and his numbers for the final count at Buchenwald or for the specifics of a brand new bridge."[18]

And that, after all, is why we should, why we must teach literature.

[18] As cited by Charles R. Duke,"Save the Eco System; Support Creative Expression," Clearing House, LI (November, 1977), 102.